

PING PONG, DING DONG & SING SONG

David Shaw

davidmax.shaw@btinternet.com

Word pairs with this sort of reduplication are quite common in the language. Even more common are those where, although not exact repeats, they have close similarity through other forms of assonance – alliteration, rhythm and simple change of a vowel sound. There are well over one hundred examples of these various formations, so the impulse to create them must be strong. The power of rhyme and rhythm is obvious from its widespread use in poetry, but how did it become so set in our psyche?

Parents seem to have an instinctive tendency to use words with repeated syllables when trying to introduce babies to the recognition and then repeating of simple items of speech. MAMA, having rhythm and repetition, is so much more effective than MA on its own, and MAMAMA is less easy to remember and repeat. The double syllable seems to be ideal in terms of rhythm and reinforcement. PAPA, DADA, NANA, PEE-PEE, BYE-BYE, GEE-GEE, WEE-WEE, TUMTUM and so on follow the pattern. Later, pairs with less than perfect duplication are introduced - TOE-TOES, DIN-DINS, JIMJAMS, BOW-WOW, MUMMY and DADDY. Maybe the adoption of affectionate name forms also relates to the use of baby talk –FIFI, MIMI, COCO, LULU, BIBI, KIKI, GIGI, TINTIN.

The tendency to produce these assonant doubletons is no new thing and not uniquely a feature of English. We have MURMUR, COUSCOUS, DODO, DUM-DUM, CANCAN, TUTU, HURDY-GURDY, PAWPAW, BERI-BERI, PIRI-PIRI, BRIC-A-BRAC, FOL-DE-ROL and others. Many of purely English origin go back a few centuries, with meanings that may have changed somewhat over time. But we continue to create more in modern decades, apparently unable to resist the allure of this type of formation.

Notable among both old and new are examples of words that are to some degree derogatory, ranging from the slightly condescending to the racially offensive – GOODY-GOODY, PALSY-WALSY, AIRY-FAIRY, EASY-PEASY, FIDDLE-FADDLE, FLIM-FLAM, FUDDY-FUDDY, HOITY-TOITY, HOTCH-POTCH, NAMBY-PAMBY, RIFF-RAFF, RAGBAG, DILLY-DALLY, SHILLY-SHALLY, CLAP-TRAP, TITTLE-TATTLE, ARTY-FARTY, WISHY-WASHY, FUDDY-DUDDY, FUZZY-WUZZY, and NIGNOG.

With some of the pairs,, the two halves work together to provide the meaning – for example WILLY-NILLY, TELL-TALE, TUTTI-FRUTTI, TIP-TOP, RAG-BAG, RAT-A-TAT, PEG-LEG, NITTY-GRITTY, AIRY-FAIRY, FAT-CAT, BIG-WIG, FLIP-FLOP, WHEELER-DEALER, and HAPPY-CLAPPY. In others one half is there just to support the meaningful part by reinforcing the sound with an assonant echo, as in CHIT-CHAT, DILLY-DALLY, EASY-PEASY, FUDDY-DUDDY, FIDDLE-FADDLE, HURLY-BURLY, HIGGLEDY-PIGGLEDY, HOTCH-POTCH, ITSY-BITSY, JIM-JAMS, LOVEY-DOVEY, MISH-

MASH, OKEY-DOKEY, PALS-YSY, RIFF-RAFF, ROLY-POLT, HELTER-SKELTER, WISHY-WASHY, ZIG-ZAG. This leaves a few others to list – BOO-HOO, DOODAH, HUMDRUM, HOBNOB, HIP-HOP, HEIGH-HO, HUGGER-MUGGER, PITTER-PATTER, RAG-TAG-, TIC-TAC and WHATNOT and the names HUMPTY-DUMPTY and GEORGIE-PORGY.

But how about pairs in common usage which do not seem to belong with most of the others? A word like ILLWILL fits the pattern but does not feel to have been created because of its rhyming parts, and is the companion formation to GOODWILL. Similarly BRAIN DRAIN and COP SHOP, although being more memorable due to rhyme, do not have the feel of being made-up expressions. Again, repeated words like TUT TUT, YUM YUM and HEAR HEAR just seem to be used for emphasis, rather than for gaining new meaning. Likewise with appellation such as Tricky Dickie.

Finally, what would be a fitting derogatory expression for someone obsessed with matters of this kind? Perhaps –

NERDY-WORDY